

My Sister 352

Chapter 352 INFORMATION IS CURRENCY

SERAPHINA'S POV

Astrid's message arrived at 7:12 a.m.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand, the faint sound swallowed by the steady rhythm of Kieran's breathing beside me.

I lay still, half tangled in cool sheets and Kieran's warmth, watching pale gold sunlight seep through the curtains.

The room smelled like us. Like heat and sweat and something deeper that had nothing to do with pheromones.

Kieran's arm was draped heavily across my waist, his palm resting possessively against my hip as though even in sleep he feared losing me.

The marks he'd left along my throat and collarbone throbbed faintly—tender reminders of the one line we had not crossed.

My body ached in that delicious, thoroughly claimed way that proved last night was no hallucination.

The phone buzzed again.

Kieran stirred slightly, his fingers tightening unconsciously against my skin.

I exhaled carefully and reached for the device, angling my body so the screen's glow wouldn't fall across his face.

Astrid Volker.

Of course.

I opened the message.

'Good morning, Seraphina.

I hope today finds you well after last evening's excitement.

If you are available, I would value the opportunity to speak with you in a more private setting. The brunch terrace at the Elysian hotel is discreet enough.

Ten o'clock?

Warmly,

Astrid V.'

My gaze drifted back to Kieran.

A faint crease marked the space between his brows, as though tension never fully released him even in sleep.

Dark lashes rested against his cheek. His collarbone and shoulders bore the imprint of my fingers where I had clutched him too hard and scratched him.

Mine.

The last thing I wanted to do was get out of bed, and even less did I want to see Astrid.

But after the...excitement of last night, it was evident that we needed to step up our game if we wanted to protect our interests and outmaneuver potential threats.

Whether Astrid was an adversary or an ally remained to be seen, and this meeting was a good way to see that.

Kieran shifted again, his nose brushing absently against my shoulder as though scenting reassurance even in sleep.

For a long moment, I did not move. I let myself memorize the weight of his arm, the warmth of his chest at my back, the faint rasp of his breathing.

The urge to burrow closer was overwhelming.

But strategy did not allow indulgence.

I glanced at my clutch by the door, knowing the perfume bottle was inside.

I typed carefully with one hand.

'Ten works. I'll see you there.'

The brunch terrace overlooked Los Angeles, the city soft in the late-morning haze.

It was an orchestration of white linens, polished silverware, and discreetly positioned bodyguards posing as businessmen.

I picked a central table—neither too exposed nor too private. A server poured sparkling water as I sat, back straight, ankles crossed.

The scent of espresso drifted through the air. Conversations murmured around me, utensils tapped porcelain, and beneath it all, the subtle hum of pack politics vibrated like a second pulse.

Astrid arrived precisely at ten, her steps unhurried and confident.

She wore ivory silk and gold jewelry that gleamed without ostentation. The seven gemstone rings adorned her fingers, moonstone dominant.

Her eyes swept over me as if taking inventory.

When she was close, her nose twitched; amusement flickered across her face.

“My, my,” she said as she took the seat opposite mine. “I did not think you would use my gift so quickly.”

I pursed my lips and said nothing.

She signaled a server with a lift of her fingers before her gaze returned to me. She leaned back, studying me intently. “You’re not embarrassed.”

“About perfume?”

“About the reason you require it.”

The implication hung between us, undeniable. So much for controlling the tone of the meeting.

Her laugh was low and satisfied. “Well, I’m pleased to know that my product is effective. Masking powerful pheromones like Alpha Blackthorne’s is no small feat.”

My face did not so much as twitch.

I lifted my glass. “Surely you didn’t call me here to discuss the effectiveness of your product. I would assume you tested it before it hit the market.”

Her eyes warmed. "Talking to you truly is a delight.

She leaned forward, folding her hands atop the table, gemstone rings catching the light. "And seeing you last night only solidified my determination to collaborate with you."

I arched a brow. "I thought I was an investment. Now it's a collaboration you want?"

A server arrived with a tall glass of mimosa. Astrid waited until he retreated before continuing.

"I did some digging," she said as I reached for my drink. "Eleven years ago, there was a scandal in this hotel. A narrative constructed with surgical precision."

My fingers stilled against the stem of my glass.

Astrid watched for a reaction.

I gave her none.

"You were shunned by two packs," she continued, pity slipping into her voice. "Publicly humiliated. More or less exiled. The story was simple: opportunistic sister seduces her sibling's intended mate."

The memory throbbed like a wound reopening.

I cleared my throat, forcing my voice to steady. "You didn't invite me to brunch to recite my own history."

"No," Astrid agreed. "I invited you because I possess something of interest."

From her structured leather bag, she withdrew a slim metallic USB drive and placed it on the table between us.

"Stories that clean rarely are. I think it's time the world knew what really happened that night, don't you?"

I stared at the USB but did not touch it. Honestly, I didn't think I was capable of moving without trembling.

"To be candid, I have to point out that it isn't direct proof," she continued. "That has already been purchased."

My gaze lifted.

“Purchased by who?”

A faint smile curved her lips. “By protocol, I cannot disclose that. And I believe it is better if you do not know.”

My stomach tightened.

Better for who?

She tapped the USB. “Don’t worry. This is enough to prove you were the victim that night.”

My throat felt dry. I would have taken a sip of my water if I could fucking move.

Astrid held my gaze steadily. “What do you say?”

“You’re offering this, why?”

Her eyes gleamed. “Because it’s easier to trust people who are in my debt.”

There it was.

“What is the price?” I asked.

Her lips curved again, pleased at the absence of guessing games. “A few weeks ago, I was to receive a shipment of Moonstones. Uncut. High-grade. Bound for refinement.”

“And?”

“And they were hijacked,” she said. “Intercepted mid-transport by individuals with capabilities that exceeded standard rogue interference. I suspect psychic involvement.”

I clenched my teeth. “And why do you think I’ll be of any help?”

Her smile sharpened. “Oh, come on, Sera. Let’s skip the part where we pretend your abilities are a secret. I do not chase what I haven’t studied.”

The air between us shifted.

I had to give it to Astrid, her position as president was well earned. The woman knew how to go for what she wanted.

“You want me to locate them.”

“I hear you can do wonderful things.”

“And if I refuse?”

Her smile did not falter as she tapped a finger on the USB and moved it an inch closer to her. “Then we simply enjoyed a pleasant brunch.”

My eyes narrowed. “You’re withholding something.”

“Of course I am,” she replied with a light shrug. “Information is currency.”

“Why me?” I asked. “I’m sure you have a myriad of resources at your disposal.”

“I do,” she agreed. “But none like you. And as you said, I test all my products before endorsing them.”

Silence settled between us.

Around us, the terrace continued in curated normalcy. Glasses clinked. Laughter drifted. The city shimmered beyond the railing, unaware of the converging forces beneath its glitter.

I looked down at the USB drive.

Eleven years of quiet suffering.

My parents' rejection.

Ethan's disappointment.

Kieran's coldness.

Celeste's accusations.

"If this proves veritable..." I began.

"Then you will consider assisting me," Astrid finished.

"Consider," I emphasized.

She inclined her head. "I would expect nothing less."

"You understand," I continued, voice even, "that if this connects to something larger—if your moonstones are fueling harm beyond financial loss—I will prioritize that over your shipment."

Her eyes did not waver. "As you should."

"Astrid," I said, voice dropping low, "if this is manipulation..."

"It is," she replied calmly. "All negotiation is. But it is not deceit."

I held her gaze for a long moment. I knew there was a lot she was hiding, but that was expected from someone of her caliber.

I still sensed no malice from her, just that slight undertone of greed—again, not surprising.

I finally reached forward and picked up the USB. It was deceptively light for something that was supposed to hold so much.

"I will review this today," I said. "You will have my answer after."

She nodded. "Fair enough."

She stood smoothly, adjusting the fall of her silk sleeve. "And Seraphina."

I looked up.

Her smile softened. "The perfume suits you."

She turned, and walked away without haste.

I remained seated for a while after she left, my reflection faint in the glass railing.

I turned the tiny device in my hands, the gravity of what it carried almost too much to bear.

'I think it's time the world knew what really happened that night, don't you?'

I clenched my fist around it. Yes, I think it was about fucking time.